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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning, such as student-team learning or work-group learning, has become the focus of inservice workshops for teachers, a theme in professional journals, and the daily routine in an increasing number of classrooms. The women's study clubs in late 19th-century United States used a similar pedagogy. By the early 1900s, perhaps as many as 1 million white, middle-class, middle-aged women belonged to these clubs, the local membership of which was generally limited to 20 members who met biweekly for 2 hours in each others' homes to pursue a course of study. Apart from the three taboo subjects (religion, politics, and "the woman question"), the inquiry of club women was wide ranging and included literature, art, history, music, geography, astronomy, botany, and foreign languages. The group decided what to study from September to June and assigned the program for each meeting. Seven or eight members read papers they had written on the assignment during each meeting. The sessions were governed by parliamentary procedure. Every member was expected to participate in some way at each meeting. At the turn of the century, most clubs began to change their focus from education for self to education for service. Study club women had at first modeled their curriculum on that of the academy in order to authenticate their intellectual abilities in an age when women's reproductive organs were reputed to drain their brains. However, they modified the pedagogy of the academy--the recitation--into collaborative learning by acknowledging a common goal, working toward it as a community, expecting participation from all members in various roles over time, and performing as writers and reciters to please one another rather than a teacher. A few study clubs of this original model remained vigorous well into the 20th century. (The document contains six references.) (CML)

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, CIRCA 1880

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Annual Meeting, April, 1990

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Collaborative learning is the pedagogical watchword of the 1990s. Whether it is called cooperative learning or student-team learning or work-group learning, it has become the focus of in-service workshops for teachers, a theme in professional journals, and the daily routine in an increasing number of American classrooms. As I read the proliferation of articles about this "new" form of learning, I am constantly reminded of the women in late nineteenth-century study clubs, who were nothing if not collaborative learners, and I wonder about the origins of the pedagogy they chose and the role it might have played in shaping the destiny of the clubs.

For thirty years after the Civil War, women's study clubs sprang up across the United States. The pioneers, however, did not call themselves study clubs. They chose names like Friends in Council, the Minerva Society, Over-the-Teacups, the Mosaic, the Mustard Seed, and the Decatur Art Class. Until much later, most groups consciously avoided the title "club" because of its masculine connotations and its association with organizations whose purposes were wholly social.

These clubs were small groups of women (their membership generally limited to 20) who met biweekly for two hours in each other's homes to pursue a course of study. Locally small, on a national scale their numbers were impressive, with perhaps as

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many as one million club members by the early 1900s.

A sociologist will tell you that the membership of these clubs was white, middle-class, and middle-aged. A feminist will tell you that these were examples of true Victorian womanhood, decorous women who thought it unseemly to list their names in a club's directory, whose first responsibilities were to their families, and who, however wide their intellectual horizons, most assuredly would not include in their studies, topics related to religion, politics, and, above all, "the woman question." An educational historian will tell you that most of these women, who were of school age in the 1860s and 1870s, had completed grammar school and perhaps a year at an academy, and were considered among the most "learned" women in their communities.

Apart from the three taboo subjects, the inquiry of club women was wide-ranging. They studied literature, art, history, music, geography, astronomy, botany, and foreign languages. Their method of instruction was simple. As a group they decided what to study over the year's meetings from September to June. For example, if the group were studying Shakespeare's comedies, they would assign two "lessons" (as they called the program of the day) to each play. At each lesson seven or eight members read papers they had written on topics which a program committee had assigned.

The sessions were well governed by parliamentary procedure, which club women wielded with as much authority as they did their brooms at home; both were a way to keep order. After the initial

brief business meeting, members read their papers and were subjected to comments by the elected "critic," who, with dictionary by her side, gently pointed out errors in pronunciation, grammar, and presentation. Every member was expected to participate in some way at each meeting in order to teach women the sound of their own voices, which had been muted in the role of True Womanhood. To encourage participation, members were often asked to recite a favorite poem or quotation as a warm-up at the start of the meeting, and many clubs levied fines if a member came unprepared.

In the beginning most program schedules might charitably have been called "miscellaneous." Topics wandered each week to where the interest of individual members lay -- Greek art in January, the reign of Elizabeth I in February, and Michelangelo in March. And always, in that pre-Carnegie public library era, what could be "researched" was dependent upon the limited number of reference books available. It helps to get a perspective on the paucity of books available at that time to know that one service of Chatauqua was a reference bureau to which subscribers could write for help with pronunciation or definition of a word or explanation of an allusion.

Most clubs initially experimented with biweekly rotation of officers so that each member could get experience in leadership, but that practice proved inefficient and unwieldy, and the clubs soon found more continuity in annual elections. Before long most clubs also adopted a yearly continuous theme around which to

build their studies. Their papers were at first (again to be charitable) highly mimetic. Indeed members often later admitted that their work had sprung full-blown from encyclopedias (but who among us has not faltered at the thought of an audacious undertaking -- for such it was to these unpracticed women).

Their oral presentations were also halting at first, but through constant practice (and most of these women made lifetime commitments to their club) and special drills in oral work, deliveries became more fluid. Some of these very same "unschooled" women, members of the Castilian Club in Boston, had their papers catalogued, at the request of the head librarian, in the Boston Public Library. Some of these very same "unschooled" women" became officers in the General Federation of Women's Clubs and addressed national conventions attended by thousands of women.

Study club women took themselves and their "work" (as they always called their club education) seriously, and, in turn, their mutual and self-instruction was taken seriously by their colleagues. Refreshments were banned at meetings; handiwork was denied (except for the Christmas rush between November and December). They did not parade for causes, but like the rather solemn, earnest young women at early women's colleges, they were out to prove only <u>themselves</u> -- most especially <u>to</u> themselves.

And they did. Their firsthand accounts overflow both with their astonishment over and their pride in their intellectual accomplishments -- which were by no means trivial. Theirs was

not Book-of-the-Month Club fare, but Dante, Aristotle, Spencer's theory of music. Theirs was an accomplishment even few men could lay claim to. Their astonishment eventually gave way to their acceptance and incorporation into their self-image of their intellectual abilities and genuine intellectual interests.

At the turn of the century, almost as quickly as they had mushroomed over the countryside, most study clubs began to change their focus from education for self to education for service, from the study of philosophy to the practice of philanthropy. By the 1900s, the small Bronte Societies and Crescent Clubs were giving way to the 500-member Peoria Woman's Club, which added to its original study of Art and Literature, departments of Education, Home, Philanthropy, and Reform. The club built its own clubhouse complete with auditorium and banquet room, and announced a new text for study, "the world around us."

In my initial work on women's study clubs, I attributed their demise or their transformation into service clubs at the turn of the century to a variety of social forces: the wider opening of higher education to women; the growth in informal opportunities for education, such as non-credit university extension courses, museums, and libraries; the blurring of lines between women's private and public spheres, brought about in part by the extension of True Womanhood's caretaking role from family to community; and, of course, the prevaling winds of the Progressive Era. Part and parcel of these was the self-confidence engendered by the clubs themselves, which led the members along

the familiar path from thought to action.

But as I revisit the study clubs, now with collaborative learning on my mind, I wonder if the methods by which they chose to learn and the content they tackled might not be another, possibly stronger, explanatory tool in analyzing their transformation.

For their curriculum, study club women chose the only model with which they had experience: the curriculum of the academy, the so-called "wisdom of the ages." But without a schoolmaster, they did what women have always done, they improvised. Combining familiar and unfamiliar components in response to a new situation, they united "old commitments with new possibilities" (Bateson, 59).

Although there was no body of knowledge they were required to master, study club women at first simply appropriated and extended the core of traditional knowledge to which they had been exposed in their schooling or had observed their college-going brothers studying. Programs were heavy on Ancient Greek playwrights and philosophers, Roman oratory, Egyptian art, and Shakespeare in every conceivable guise. Papers were impersonal, bookish, and espoused one world view. As university extension grew, a few clubs even wrote away for and followed a recommended course of study.

Having tied themselves to the curriculum of the academy, club women reproduced it in modified imitation of the pedagogy of academe -- the recitation. In an age when women's reproductive

organs were reputed to drain their brains, it was initially important for club women to authenticate their intellectual abilities. It was male academe (as M. Carey Thomas knew well) that conferred validation upon intellectual achievement, so club women modeled the institution as best they could. But it was their modification, I believe, their improvisation, their collaboration, that made the significant difference.

Acknowledging their common goal, they worked toward it as a community. Authority was vested in no one person; there was no hierarchical intellectual structure, no asymmetry of teacher and student. Egalitarianism carried the day. No professor greeted the members with a syllabus as they came in the door or established learning outcomes to be tested by examination. No student worked to please the teacher or to compete with another; each worked at her own level of competence and to instruct her sisters. Each woman decided for herself what learning goals and objectives she wished and needed to accomplish -- within, of course, the context of the group. Although each read her paper in recitation style, she had determined and constructed its content. Each woman was considered competent to play a role in the development of both yearly and weekly programs. Each woman was expected to take on different roles -- sometimes teacher, sometimes critic, sometimes president or secretary -- but always learner. Each had a stake in one another's progress.

Because they were in a protected place where they needed not to feel shame at not knowing something, because there was no

professor to tell them how to go about writing their papers, because there was no teacher to organize, to interpret, to point out connections between ideas, to illuminate applications, to buff it all with coherence, study club women grew skilled at learning how to learn. Once they became the active agents in the construction of their own knowledge, they began to turn their back on both the pedagogy and curriculum of the academy.

The minutes of the Decatur (Illinois) Art Class, a prototypical study club founded in 1880, afford an insight into the members' incipient rejection of the hierarchical tradition of higher education, a tradition that assumed a deficit in students which had to be corrected or filled. Eleven years into their collaborative study, the Art Class walked downtown en masse to a public lecture on Faust by Professor Denton Snider of St. Louis. Because they were just beginning Faust in their year's study of German literature, they invited the professor to attend their discussions.

After Snider's first meeting with the club, the secretary recorded, in uncharacteristically brief notation: "The lesson was Act I, Part II of Faust with criticisms by Prof. Snider. It was of interest but suffered from interruptions." The next week the normally full page of happy, self-congratulatory, personalized minutes was reduced to three laconic sentences: "Attendance good. Lesson Act II, Part I, with the usual criticisms by Prof. Snider. Adjourned to meet with Mrs. Roberts" (Martin, 154).

A few years later, their impatience again flared in response

to a figure from patriarchal academe: "The lesson on English literature ... was moving along nicely when interrupted by Prof. Troop who called to talk University Extension lectures to the ladies. He occupied nearly a half hour of valuable time. But the lesson was finished and well finished with Richard Carvel" (Martin, 153).

It is also during this time that the Art Class programs begin to deviate from the impersonal, abstract, received knowledge of academe. Members start to integrate cognitive and affective learning. The minutes record admiration for a new grandchild allowed a brief appearance at a meeting, and the club inaugurates "play days," celebrations, in costume, of their study and their club. Members begin to rely more on their own knowledge -- subjective knowledge born of experience or constructed in the crucibles of their own minds. Mrs. Millikin visits Tuskeegee on her way home from a winter vacation in Florida and reports to the club on the educational program of the Institute. And the women begin to connect personal and public knowledge. In conjunction with their study of early American literature, they discuss Decatur's own Blue Laws. The freedom they achieved in their minds became freedom for their minds (Giamatti, 27).

Club women nationwide began to take the world around them as a text. But, unlike the textbook of the late nineteenth-century college, their text was one with multiple messages, admitting of various and sometimes conflicting interpretations, a text in

which there was no final summation, no conclusion, no impress of authority. What they saw in the public schools or prisons or urban slums became their raw data, and they applied to it the pedagogy of their study clubs -- researching, writing papers, and, now, taking action. At the annual meeting of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1904, President Sarah Decker announced: "Ladies, you have chosen me as your leader. Well, I have an important piece of news to give you. Dante is dead. He has been dead for several centuries, and I think it is time that we dropped the study of his Inferno and turned our attention to our own" (quoted in Martin, 172).

Having breathed life into their study by re-imaging the classroom with collaborative learning and multiple perspectives, these club women were beginning to reinvent themselves. People survive, Mary Catherine Bateson suggests, because even though they wear the same old label, they alter what they do (9). The passion, energy, and accomplishments of club women who became "municipal housekeepers" is legend. Was it, perhaps, in part the legacy of the collaborative learning they had fashioned in their study clubs? The democratic planning and decision-making, the support for risk-taking, the insights into the potential and power of groups, the experience of different roles which forced them out of usual patterns, the identification of their own needs, the development of their independence as learners?

Although almost all clubs began with the same collaborative learning pattern, not all transformed themselves into municipal

housekeepers. Some study clubs simply dwindled as the older membership died and was not replaced by younger women. By the twentieth century, younger women of the middle class had not only more opportunities for a high school education, but, for an increasing number, in an increasingly credentialed society, a college degree as well. And as American women began to live their lives more and more beyond their dooryards, the traditional study club programs, which avoided conflict, such as the discussion of politics or slums or women's suffrage might have engendered, must have seemed a pale version of reality.

A few study clubs of the original model remained vigorous well into the twentieth century. Accounts of these clubs often are built around a series of strong club leaders. And again I am reminded of current research on collaborative learning. For collaborative education to succeed, say a number of studies, students at times need to be dependent as well as independent learners. There are occasions when they need a teacher to create structure and delineate issues, to ask questions or give advice that will move the group along the path to insight, to monitor group progress (Osborne, 70; Maher, 30; "Cooperative Learning," 2). It is possible that ongoing study clubs were fortunate in having just such teachers to take them through, what we today would call, a general education curriculum.

And certainly a further explanation lies in another kind of diversity. "...there is more than one way of being female," Mary Bateson reminds us (60); and, of course, there is more than one

way of learning. While some women sought the validation of academe and others sought the flexibility, freshness, and freedom of creating their own knowledge from the world around them, for a number of women the quiet intellectual inquiry of sisterhood, which they found in their small familiar clubs, was the prize that mattered.

The club minutes of 100 years ago continue to raise questions for me. What are the roots of collaborative learning? What is it that so invigorates group learning? Why, in the history of education, both formal and informal, are movements toward collaborative learning -- whether the focus of John Dewey or the Open Classrooms of the 1960s -- so eagerly received -- and so seldom sustained? What is the significance of learning method? What are the interactions of method and content? Of method and gender?

While I struggle with those questions, the vitality that collaborative learning engenders is never far from my thoughts, and I am reminded of the dialectic Bartlett Giamatti found in the sports participant -- a dialectic of improvisation and obligation, restraint and release, energy and order (33). It is the same dialectic, I believe, that fueled the collaborative learning of women's study clubs.

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